CHAPTER 2

I Notice = I Care

I Spy

Carolyn Paddock has been in corporate and commercial aviation for 25 years. During her time in the business, she has flown everyone from international pop stars and top-tier actors to billionaires and members of the Saudi Royal family. The service she delivers is in keeping with this exceptional mode of travel; she works with her passengers in a luxury environment that is relatively small and incredibly intimate. This is not a job for the faint of heart, as she must deliver a customized experience within the strictest of standards of passenger safety and bespoke customer service.

On an overnight flight where the sofas were made up into beds, Carolyn noticed that one of her passengers frequently got into bed only to get up a bit later to take a call or get a drink of water. At these times she would go and straighten the sheets, as she wanted his bed to look perfect when he returned. Each time he returned his bed was remade and looked fresh and tidy; he clearly liked this attention to detail. Carolyn, however, noticed a small, but important point; when returning to bed he frequently had something in his hand, whether it was a glass of water or his phone. This made pulling back the tucked-in sheets a little more difficult and not as quick as if he had returned to an unmade bed, and so Carolyn made a correction. Rather than tucking in the sheets, she straightened the covers and folded back the top so there was an inviting “opening” for the passenger to use. Rather than having to pull apart a freshly made bed, all he had to do was
slip right in. Easy to do, this action and correction showed Carolyn’s consideration for her passenger.

What Carolyn did was notice. And when she acted on what she had noticed, her passenger felt cared for, and care means everything in the customer service relationship. As business owners or managers, your job is to care for those in your businesses, but “caring” for strangers is not as easy as it sounds. Why? Because you can’t make your staff actually feel for your customers. But you can ask your employees to notice what is happening to their customers (a customer entering the business) and empower them to act on what they see (I’ll open the door for this person), and your customer, in turn, will feel cared for, nurtured, and considered (what a thoughtful gesture). With each action you let the guest know that you noticed. Each time you noticed you acted, demonstrating to your guests that you were fully aware of their situation. Noticing their individual situation let them feel cared for. It’s that simple: observe the situation and offer an action.

My principle of “I notice = I care” gives everyone involved in the service equation what they want. It gives guests the “care” they seek while giving staff members concrete things to do to demonstrate care for their guests. This is a surefire way to get positive feedback. With the “I notice = I care” equation, everyone wins.

It is actually easier to understand the principle of “I notice = I care” by looking at things from the opposite direction. Most people perceive inattentive service as the staff “not caring,” and this is a very clear equation as well: I didn’t notice = I didn’t care. Or from the guests’ perspective: “no one notices me/my situation = no one here cares at all.” Ouch. But this is really the way it feels. For example, customers will remember the frustration of waiting on hold on the phone (no one notices I’m patiently waiting = no one cares about my time) or of getting an overstuffed shopping bag that is about to break (the salesperson didn’t notice that this bag is overstuffed = he doesn’t care about getting everything home in one piece) or of struggling to exit the kids’ store while managing a baby, a stroller, a bag, and another child and the staff lingers nearby chatting (those employees didn’t notice my struggle = they don’t give a hoot). As a business owner or manager, this is
not what you want your customers to think and remember. Your customers should never wonder whether your company cares about them as customers or as people. Even if customers assume that big business is a cold, dark, and inhuman force, your job is to show some hospitality to your customers every time.

The term “hospitality” deserves some attention, as it is a challenging idea for our business-oriented minds. Generally, “hospitality” and “business” are distant cousins—or are they? Many people have notions about big business: cutthroat corporate villains driven by the bottom line, focused on getting ahead at any cost. And “hospitality” almost seems like a picture out of the 1950s: sugary smiling staff, outstretched hands, saccharin slogans like “We’re here for you!” In fact, however, the best-run and most successful businesses are very focused on their customers and their staff, and thus they epitomize the essence of hospitality.

“Hospitality” is defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary, as “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.” One usually associates hospitality with the restaurant or hotel business, but in truth it really defines what many businesses do daily. No matter what the business is, it receives any number of people a day; its success depends on both the first-timers and the repeat guests. A business is friendly and generous with its time and approach. It is there to provide an experience (aka: entertain) with what it offers to its customers. And businesses offer their experience to guests (the name for our clients, who, we hope, will be repeat guests), visitors (one-time guests), and strangers (first-time guests).

[Throughout the book I will use “guests,” “customers,” and “clients” interchangeably. One may apply more to your business but all are meant to represent the people who you rely on to patronize your business.]

Customer service is all about thinking of your customers’ needs, and this is where the associations with hospitality have their roots. “Thinking of your guests’ needs” is very close to “caring” for your guests, and while managers and staff members do it all the time, it is impossible to ask someone to care. Either the person cares or doesn’t. Many businesses work very hard to try and hire people who have a caring nature. There are online surveys designed to decode whether the applicant has the “caring gene” or not. There are scripted
interview questionnaires written to allow interviewers to determine whether the applicant is more likely to be empathetic or self-centered. And while well-meaning and basically effective, the business of service can be quite relentless and hard to do. In any customer service position you are dealing with strangers day in and day out, and the personalities and moods of your customers require an emotional fortitude that takes time to build and finesse. Even the most qualified and caring pro will be put to the test when engaging with an especially difficult customer. There are few questionnaires that can determine how an applicant will act under duress.

Therefore, what I look for in an applicant is a high level of empathy combined with high energy and an interest in “doing.” Customer service requires boundless energy; staff members must always be “on” and must be aware of their surroundings and the customers in their business. So I look for people who will be active and who can demonstrate through their actions that they are by nature empathetic. While “being empathetic” can be draining, “acting on what you see” can be fun. Here’s the difference: instead of feeling like you have to ask “How are you today?” to show interest in a guest who is looking around, you can offer “May I get you a basket?” as you see that the customer does not have one. To sound authentic, “How are you today?” must convey care and concern, that is, empathetic. And that is a lot to ask of a staff member. Offering a basket or offering to show the customer an item or area of the business utilizes energy and knowledge. And demonstrates empathy. The empathy is secondary to the action, but the action itself demonstrates care. This focus on energetic observation is key to the customer experience, and it is at the core of my principle “I notice = I care.” Hiring staff with energy combined with empathy is a little easier than finding someone who is only empathetic. Give me someone with empathy and energy any day—empathy alone won’t do the job.

Don’t get me wrong. You must seek out individuals with an outwardly empathetic nature. But when it comes time to ask your employees to “be empathetic,” asking is a little harder to do. Empathy takes a lot of emotional energy, and while it can feel very rewarding, empathy is not always rewarded. In every job we all like to know (and are inspired to work harder) when our efforts have made a difference.
In the hospitality business there is a convention known as “reading the guest.” “Reading the guest” means observing the cues the customer is giving and then reacting to what is observed. For example, when a cashier is “reading” that someone has her hands full as she is checking out at the register, the cashier might ask this customer whether she has a car outside or needs help getting a cab. This starts a conversation and demonstrates the care that the customer might not be expecting but will certainly appreciate. “Reading the guest” is really asking you to be tuned in, to understand and consider your guest while you are “taking care” of him or her. But it is much easier and more business-like to ask your staff to use their empathy by “reading” someone rather than to instruct them to “be empathetic.” And it is easier to ask someone to look for cues to respond to than to ask the person to “care about” a virtual stranger.

There is a children’s guessing game called “I Spy.” It is an easy game that starts with a little rhyme, “I spy with my little eye,” and then one child finds and focuses on an object and invites another to guess what the object is by asking yes/no questions. For example, if the first child says “I spy with my little eye…something blue,” the other child will ask a series of questions (Is it on the floor? Is it made of plastic? Is it round? Is it the dog dish?) in order to guess what that “something blue” is. The first child can respond with “yes” or “no” or with “hot” or “cold” to indicate that the guesser is closer to getting it right or is going in the wrong direction. The game is a great way to explore your surroundings and focus on the little details around you while passing the time.

Asking your employees to notice everything that is happening with your customers is a bit like “I Spy” in that you are asking them to focus on little details and act on what they see. It is essential to show the team what to notice and how to act on it. Sometimes noticing could result in a conversation (“May I help you with your things?”), or an action (helping someone open the door to enter a business), or an appearance (making eye contact to show that you are there and able to help). All these are actions that tell guests that you see them and their situation and are able to help. Noticing all the little things is a key component in the customer service equation.

When working with any type of full-service restaurant, I always ask the staff to help people with their chairs. Both men and women appreciate
someone who comes to help with their chair, it is an age-old custom, and it really impresses people. And here’s the secret: you don’t even have to get there in time. Just the fact that you came across the room to make an effort to be there demonstrated that you noticed the guest has arrived at the table. And even when the guest in question doesn’t see that you are there to help pull or push in his chair, you can bet that the others at the table did see. You made an effort to demonstrate that you noticed and that is appreciated. This is just one example of many “things to notice and act on that will really impress your guests.” What you do can be big or small, but it adds up. Simple things, such as holding a door when a guest enters or leaves, pushing an elevator button before the client goes to that floor, calling to confirm a reservation rather than asking the guest to do so, are easy to do and demonstrate clearly that you notice the customers’ experience.

We all notice things “with our little eye.” Sometimes we are focusing precisely on a particular thing. Sometimes what we are looking at is secondary to our thought at the moment. But either way, we have observed this thing, this object, this event, and it has now become a thought, however small, that can inspire a memory.

**Memories…**

Our memory is like a sieve; every moment of every experience gets passed through our memory, and various pieces of the experience stick. Memory is made up of three stages: encoding (grasping what you are experiencing and putting it into thought), storage (how we store thoughts and access them, both short-term and long-term storage), and retrieval (accessing that thought). The first part, encoding, is making sense of what you are experiencing; we do this visually, acoustically, or through semantics or meaning. Then we have to figure out how to organize this thought: is it something to be accessed quickly or accessed after a longer period of time? Our brain will determine whether the information that is coming in will go to short-term or to long-term memory. Short-term memory only exists for 30 seconds or less, and we can only store between seven and nine thoughts at one time during this period; thoughts go into short-term memory and are immediately pushed out
again by other thoughts coming in after the first ones. Long-term memory is considered to be unlimited; thoughts can exist there for a lifetime.

We retrieve our thoughts from short-term memory and long-term memory quite differently. Memories stored in short-term memory are retrieved sequentially, what went in first will always be first when we refer to it again. A sequence of numbers (for example, 1, 10, 25, 45) will always be accessed in that same sequence (rather than as 10, 25, 1, 45). But long-term memories are retrieved in a different way: by association. Where you were, who you were with, what the weather was like when you first had the thought will be remembered and will remain attached to the memory forever. We are reminded of things that have been stored in long-term memory when we return to locations we know or when we see old friends. We get flooded with memories when we see a childhood toy or a familiar object or place. These associations are very strong; they have attached to our thoughts, were stored in our memory, and stay attached to the thought forever.

One of my clearest childhood memories is the scent of my grandmother’s new shower curtain. Fresh green vinyl, just out of the package, hung in her new apartment bathroom still ripe with the scent of polymers and plastic. Just smelling anything like it transports me back in time. My grandmother had just moved into an apartment on the ground floor of a newish complex about a mile from our home. In my mind, the mind of a ten-year-old, this was the coolest, most amazing possibility: one could live in a one-bedroom home on one floor with everything in close proximity. It was like a little piece of heaven, and it was the first time I was introduced to the idea of apartment living (a cozy home), female independence (my grandmother was living alone for the first time), and freedom of choice (that green shower curtain, divine!). My memory of the scent of the shower curtain is just the portal to many powerful feelings: the associations and the emotions they inspire are way bigger than the scent of the shower curtain alone.

We all have experiences like this. Our memories create associations laced with emotions and strong feelings. And while my memory was wonderful and filled with associations of possibility, some memories are not so great but are equally powerful. Think about the last glass door that you opened when entering a store or bank. Was the glass clean or covered in fingerprints? How
about that chair in the waiting room? Was it a little wobbly, a little sticky? How about the subway or bus? Grimy and never cleaned? In all of these situations you will remember something but not about entering a building, meeting a colleague, or getting to work. Instead, you have taken in moments that have left memories of cleanliness and care. Things someone else failed to notice and act on.

Associations are powerful carriers of emotion. Our memories inspire associations, emotions, and reactions in us that are complex and dynamic. And creating memories and associations is what business is all about. Madison Avenue execs have gotten rich by making use of associations in every ad in print, on TV or on a billboard. Just the sound of a popping soda can cap inspires thirst! The picture of sizzling meat can make us feel hungry. There are many such associations businesses depend on to make sales.

People will remember many things about your business. They will remember the things you have actively presented to them about your business and they will remember many other things that they noticed on their own. They will create many associations that will attach to these memories about their experience in your business. And then they will perceive your business based on their memories and associations. Perception is reality. So even if your business delivers an experience with service that shines (the line was short; that one salesperson was so helpful; I found exactly what I needed), your customers will have associations with each moment that shape their perception of their experience and your business (the line was short, and I was standing under an a/c vent; that salesperson had a tattoo with a Japanese character; I found what I needed, and Beyoncé was playing in the background). They will remember this experience and your business because of the associations they made. This is a win-win situation. Your business demonstrated that it noticed the customer, and the customer felt cared for and remembers this positive impression.

But what if everything happened as above, but on the way out the guest notices a pile of returned items sitting next to the last register? What will your customer be thinking? “What happens to that stuff? Does it go back on a shelf? Is my stuff used? I hope not.” In short, every little thing people notice represents an opportunity for them to trust your business or doubt
it. When you notice all the little things in your business (there is a pile of returns at register 12) and act on what you see (let’s return it to the stock room ASAP), then there is little left to impact your customers’ memories other than what you intend them to experience. Their reality is then your reality: because you made it so. That means that you must be prepared: prepared to notice everything.

This opens up a Pandora’s box of “things to notice” about your business. Your guests will notice everything about your business, and this means you have to notice first. One thing I always look for when asked to assess a new client’s business is dust. Is there dust on the plants, speakers, columns, picture frames, lighting fixtures, and venting louvers? Businesses where managers or staff have noticed this and have cleaned it, demonstrate “I notice” to me and everyone else who may be looking around. In your business “I notice” extends to cleanliness but also to every detail under your roof. The temperature of your space, the sounds, the smells, and even the lighting all contribute to the guests’ overall impression. Every little thing that someone will experience on an emotional or physical level is something that you must notice and react to. Service-oriented businesses are all about noticing guests and anticipating their needs. And by demonstrating that you notice, you are demonstrating to your guests that you care about them, their patronage, and their comfort. The service experience is not just about service; it is about action, intervention, and communication. And if you can act, intervene, and communicate with your guests, then you have a great chance of surviving and succeeding on many levels for years to come.

**You Smell Marvelous**

Being proactive is part of “noticing” your guests and their experience. A great number of businesses focus on the odor of their public spaces and spend millions on creating a signature scent for their business. Hotels are the leaders in this area and are proactive about the customer experience, down to the scent of the lobby. In New York City, the Gramercy Park Hotel has partnered with La Labo, a high-end British fragrance company, to design a signature scent for the hotel. When you walk into the hotel, the scent is there: familiar, complex,
noticeable, and intoxicating. WestHouse hotel in Manhattan invested in a custom fragrance for the hotel called “Guests Only” and designed by a fragrance company called 12.29 that designs bespoke “olfactory identities” for its clients (including fashion designer Jason Wu and auto manufacturer Mercedes Benz).

So why spend money on a signature scent? Well, let’s go back to memory and association: our olfactory system is said to be 10,000 times more sensitive than sight, taste, and hearing. Our sense of smell activates an intense memory of a business that will remain in our minds—with powerful positive associations. Giving a business a signature scent is a proactive way to create a memory that people will associate with a warm welcome, an exclusive experience, or a beautiful setting. Being proactive is what service is about, creating a signature scent and utilizing it in your customer areas is just one way to demonstrate that you notice and care about the customers’ experience.

Because our sense of smell is so very strong, it is important to consider all the aspects of scent in your business. Some unassuming businesses are known for their inherent scent: a cobbler smells like leather and polish; a bakery smells of yeast, caramel, and vanilla; a flower shop smells of, you guessed it, roses and lilies. So what if your business smells like something unexpected? Imagine an office that smells of chlorine, a cheese store that smells of Windex, or a dentist’s office that smells of a wet mop. These, too, create associations and will impact the customers’ experience.

Service as a whole is active and intentional. When unintentional events occur (my appointment is running late; the item I ordered is wrong), customers say that “the service was bad.” Unintended things occurred and this tilts the scale of service from “intentionally good” to “unintentionally bad” and then straight into “bad service.” These unintended moments are the sort of memory that people keep and ponder over long after experiencing bad service. The memory has been created, and the customer now has the resulting feelings. But in fact, the bad unintended memories (my steak was completely overcooked) stick just as easily as the positive intended recovery (so they sent us a round of drinks), and this latter action becomes a memory as well. The memories of good service, of positive intentional actions, are indelible.
It is important to recognize that you are providing an experience for your guests, one that will make them feel cared for and inspire them to come back. Every little thing in your business will inspire a memory of your brand. So you must be proactive, alert, and attentive to everything that the customer may experience. You must do everything possible in order to create a positive impression so that your business stays in your customers’ memories for all the right reasons.

**Tips and Takeaways**

- **You First.** Noticing starts with you, the manager or leader. When you walk by things that are out of place or when you fail to notice something that a staff member is doing, then you send the message that it is okay to turn a blind eye to the workplace and staff. You must uphold the brand by acting in its best interest. Noticing and acting on what you notice is important to your success as a leader; you will come across as being able to “see everything,” which keeps your employees on their toes. It also sends the message to the guests who are around you that you don’t miss a beat and that the operation is running well under your supervision.

- **Share What You See.** You must train your employees to notice the little things and to act on what they see. Leading by example is a positive way to demonstrate many important things, but you must also encourage the team members to act on what they notice as well. Ask your team for feedback about your space and work environment, ask them what they observe in serving their guests and clients, and ask them for creative solutions to what they observe. Your team is made up of many individuals who have the power to notice and care about your guests. Allow them to also notice and care about your business; it is their workplace after all, and little improvements can go a long way toward developing a satisfied team.

- **Notice Your Team.** The principle of “I notice = I care” applies also to seeing your staff members and engaging with them in a positive way. You can engage with your teams by noticing what they do and need and then acting on it as well. Innovate new ways to “notice” things about
your business. For example, you can design a contest that involves the team in making improvements to the space you all share or the systems you all use. Awards such as “employee of the month” can be made more unique to your brand and fun for the staff when you highlight a new way of looking at things in your business. And by noticing and acknowledging the people who notice things, you are also demonstrating that you care about your employees.

- **Connect with Your Guests.** I’ve coached new managers who have trouble finding ways to talk to or connect to guests except when there is a problem. They have trouble just walking up to a customer and engaging; it is hard to do and most managers are fearful of intruding on the guests’ experience. If you want to engage with your customers, apply the principle of “I notice = I care” to create ways of connecting. Have your new manager posted near the front of your store and offer shopping baskets or have the manager ask customers whether they know in what aisle to find what they are looking for. By noticing that the customer may need assistance, the manager has an opportunity to interact with the patron in a way that can potentially lead to a natural conversation. Help set your new managers up for success by talking through good opportunities to notice guests in your business. This way you can get new managers more comfortable in their role and help them gain confidence in speaking with customers.